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Ex-Hostage Said to Carry Message From Captors

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 18 — The Rev. Benjamin Weir, whose release from captivity in Lebanon was announced today, carried a message from his captors that set out demands for the release of the remaining Americans being held in Lebanon, Reagan Administration officials said.

The officials would not specify the contents of the message or the means used to transmit it. They said Mr. Weir, who is fluent in Arabic, had been questioned extensively by American analysts.

A senior official said the message was essentially a restatement of earlier demands made by the captors. "There are no new conditions for the release of the hostages that we're aware of," he said.

Other Administration officials, meanwhile, provided some details about Syria's recent decision to play a more active role in the continuing negotiations, which apparently involve a number of shadowy Shiite Moslem groups in Lebanon. The officials said, however, that the Administration would not tell the complete story of its diplomatic maneuvers while captives were still held in Lebanon.

McFarlane Hints at Complexity

Robert C. McFarlane, the President's national security adviser, hinted at the complexity of the hostage situation in remarks today in Colorado Springs to the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association.

Mr. McFarlane said the announcement of the release of Mr. Weir had been delayed because of intelligence from the region suggesting that the remaining hostages were to be released soon.

"Because today, in Lebanon, the competition, if you will, for custody over these people is fairly keen, between three and four different factions, we thought it possible that the awareness Sunday or Monday of Reverend Weir's release could intensify that competition and make it more difficult for the release of the others," he said.

Mr. McFarlane added that there were "literally half a dozen avenues that seem to hold some promise of help, but I wouldn't pretend they've worked; they haven't."

Release by Israel

Administration officials said the Syrian Government's attitude changed sharply after Israel this month released the final group of more than 750 Arabs, mostly Shiites, it had been holding in Atlit Prison near Haifa.

"There's a great deal of activity going on," a senior official said. "It picked up significantly after the last of the Atlit prisoners were freed."

Another official said the Syrians believed that there had been a deal last June in which 39 American hostages taken from Trans World Airlines Flight 847 would be freed in exchange for the immediate release of the Shiites held by Israel. During the crisis President Reagan conferred by telephone with President Hafez al-Assad of Syria about ways to gain the hostages' freedom, and some officials later acknowledged that Mr. Assad had been instrumental in arranging for their release.

When Syria saw in July that the Israelis were continuing to hold the Arab prisoners, their enthusiasm for negotiating the release of the remaining Americans cooled.

"The Syrians made the assumption there was a linkage," the official said. "They said, 'You promised to let all of them go, and now you haven't.'"

United States officials insisted at the time that no deal had been struck. These officials said they had been pressing Israel to release the Shiites even before the T.W.A. plane had been hijacked and its passengers dispersed to houses in Lebanon.

An official said the United States had been involved in intense diplomatic efforts to free the remaining hostages. He declined to provide details about many of what he said were key elements, but said the United States Government had been in contact through intermediaries with the Iranian Government.

Officials said it was unclear whether Syria had played a decisive role in the release of Mr. Weir.

A Sense of Momentum

One official said the Reagan Administration was trying to continue the "momentum" created by Mr. Weir's release after 16 months in captivity.

"We are working on the assumption that when you get momentum, you do everything you can to keep it going," he said. "Nonetheless, this is the Middle East, and nothing ever happens as fast as you think it will."

A senior intelligence source said the captors had continually moved the hostages around. Sometimes, he said, they have been placed in areas that the United States would be likely to attack if the Administration decided on military retaliation.

This official said the movement of the hostages was done so openly that American analysts had concluded that it was intended as a warning against attacking the particular areas where they were held. "Either that, or they are extraordinarily naïve about the ways we gather information," the source said.

Extensive Debriefing

An Administration official said that Mr. Weir had been debriefed extensively. They said, however, that his recollections could add only fragments to the murky picture of precisely who is holding the captives.

The officials believe that Mr. Weir spent at least some time in a Lebanese Army barracks in the Baalbek area of the Bekaa region of Lebanon, which was taken over several years ago by Shiite forces. Among the groups that use the barracks, one official said, are the Party of God and a contingent of Iranian revolutionary guards.

One group holding the hostages is believed to be connected to the Musawi clan of Baalbek. The demands made in several kidnappings in the region, including the hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner last December in which two Americans were killed, have focused on the release of Shiites arrested in a series of truck bombings in Kuwait.

Lebanese and American sources have said one of the groups reportedly holding the American hostages has a relative in prison in Kuwait.